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ABSTRACT

This paper emphasizes the need for today's early childhood programs to meet children's present needs and still prepare them to cope with the future. Current early education trends are discussed as a basis for planning for the future. The factor identified as being most important to a preschool child's perception of the future (his aspirations and the behaviors necessary to achieve them) is the occupational expectations his parents have for him. Women, ethnic minorities, and children of poverty-stricken families are viewed as "future deprived" and in need of special attention in this area now. Several things that early childhood education programs can do to help children develop a better future-focused role image are: (1) emphasize the development of coping skills, (2) help develop the joy of learning so children will be motivated to keep on learning, (3) teach problem-solving skills, (4) help children develop a good present self-image by helping them become competent and teaching them to behave acceptably, (5) include career education, (6) emphasize cooperation rather than competition, and (7) get parents involved. (JMB)

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TODAY'S CHILD - TOMORROW'S WORLD*

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The topic "Today's Child - Tomorrow's World" places us unquestionably in the midst of one of the most controversial issues in early childhood education today, even in the midst of one of the most controversial issues in education today. Most of us have been touched in one way or another by the issue of the degree to which early childhood education should focus on the future. The wider our experience, the more likely we have been affected by this issue.

As early childhood educators, we are generally more concerned about today's child in "today's" environment and in many respects rightly so. As I see my responsibility today, however, it is to discuss today's environment as a beginning point but to project ahead to how we can help today's young child cope with tomorrow's world. I would like to begin with the educational world as it exists for today's young children or perhaps it would be more honest to say as it exists for the professional educators of young children.

The young children we teach can generally be described as present oriented. They do not have a very good understanding of either the present or the past, not to mention the future. Thinking ahead to the future presents unique problems. Toffler and other futurists have been very strong in their criticism of today's education as built on the past model of industrial bureaucracy. These criticisms apply to early childhood education to the extent that regimentation, lack of individualization, rigid systems of seating, grouping

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and grading, and the authoritarian role of the teacher are characteristic of programs. A more directly recognizable carry-over from this kind of education which does more directly affect the early childhood educator is the "downward push" which it exerts. In other words, the pressure it exerts on the kindergarten teacher to get the child ready for first grade, and so it goes up the ladder. Fortunately, not all programs for young children can be characterized in this way. As I see it the task of helping today's child deal with tomorrow's world is to provide a present which is relevant to the future but is at the same time consistent with the developing abilities of young children. In this context, I would like to review some of the realities of the present educational scene because only from this frame of reference can we look ahead to the future.

Some Consistent Trends

Period of Consolidation of Findings.

Today's world of early childhood education is somewhat less in the limelight today than it was ten years ago. We appear to be in a period of consolidation of findings. Kagan has disturbed a few people with his finding that the effects of deprivation on Guatemalan children are not necessarily permanent. Raymond Moore testified before Congress that formal schooling should not begin before age eight and Project Head Start did not make the dramatic changes in the intellectual abilities of young children many people hoped for. These events have made ripples but have not generally changed the views of those knowledgeable about early childhood education. What seems to be developing is a deeper understanding of the complexity of human behavior and difficulty of changing its direction with short-term or stop-gap methods.

No evidence to date is strong enough to cause us to question the importance of the first six years of life. Considering the number of children who

have a less than desirable environment during their earliest years, how fortunate it is if this environment is not an irreversible determinant of behavior.

There is some evidence that if a program is sufficiently intensive, it can make a difference in the child's performance. There is, however, a moral question involved in such intensive intervention -- How much right does an outsider have to intervene in a family's rearing of its children? Of greater significance to us as teachers are findings that gains made by the children in compensatory programs are related to program emphases, and that affective characteristics such as motivation and self-worth which are strongly affected by environment are more susceptable to change than is readiness which has a stronger heritable factor.

Growth of Programs through Funding.

The greatest boosts to early childhood education have come through state and Federal funding. Currently 35 states provide some kind of aid to kindergartens. This does not mean that all five-year-old children are in kindergarten nor does this mean that there is stability or quality. Unfortunately, in some states every budget crunch means a renewed consideration of the appropriation of state funds for kindergarten. Kindergartens are subject to the same problems of overcrowding and under-equipping as other local school programs creating very serious questions regarding quality.

While Federal funding of programs has been even less stable, the need for guidelines and standards has been recognized in planning and a definite attempt has been made to influence programs toward consistency with the characteristics of children and currently to influence the continuity of the child's educational experience. Increases in funding, especially for day care,

have in no way kept pace with need but recent legislative attempts seem to have profitted from some of the criticisms and controversy of several years ago.

Divergent Philosophies

One direct result of federal funding of early childhood programs and research has been the development of divergent program models. On the one hand, effect on the field has been positive inasmuch as some stimulation and rethinking of programs have been stimulated; however, the lack of agreement among professionals has created a certain amount of divisiveness when unity of purpose might be a definite asset. Not only do we have programs which are supported by different philosophical and research bases but we also have programs which employ a wide range of facilities and approaches. The Task Force of the Education Commission of the States questioned the usual classroom approach for the education of all children recommending some combination of home and school based program. Use of television and mobile facilities have been explored but possibilities are not near exhaustion. This is an area in which consolidation of findings may work to our advantage. No doubt we do need certain kinds of diversity because of differences in children, families, and geographical location, but we have not yet reached a point of rational decision-making.

Increased Day Care Needs

Statistics on the number of working mothers with children under the age of six become more and more staggering each year. Yet this has been an extremely difficult need for the country to respond to. The care of children, despite the figures on need, is still considered by many to be a family responsibility and thus the funding of programs is highly controversial.

One of the most controversial issues in day care is based on the fear of some that the school or center will replace the home in the role of inculcating the values of society. This is particularly serious if children come from minority and low income groups and staff come from different income and racial groups. Teachers do not like to be reminded that all sorts of values are transmitted to children through the curriculum, simple physical aspects of the classroom, authority of the teacher and age or social class segregation. Seldom are teachers able to analyze their own values and those of the families they serve. Yet, family life-styles of today are so vastly different for the children within any classroom that it is critical to accept ways of behaving that might have been rejected in the classroom of a few years ago.

The fact that many children in day care come from low-income and minority homes also increases the need for comprehensive programs. The provision of medical, nutritional, dental, and social services requires an indisciplinary staff as well as many cooperative working relationships within the community.

Involvement of Parents

Along with an increased emphasis on day care needs has come an equally significant trend toward greater involvement of parents not only in participation in centers but also in programs enabling them to become better educators of their own children. Parents of low-income and minority groups have become much more articulate in expressing their desires for their children with the result that programs for vastly different racial and cultural groups are beginning to reflect these differences.

Factors Related to Future Success

Futurists from a wide range of disciplines agree on five assumptions: 1) today's schools and universities are too past and present bound;

2) technological and social change is outracing the educational system; 3) the concept of the future is closely bound up with the motivation of the learner; 4) the future is not merely a "subject" but a perspective as well and calls for a new organization of knowledge; and 5) that a focus on the future is relevant to all learners, regardless of age. (4:xxiv-xxv)

Benjamin Singer (3) indicates that the development of a "future-focused role-image" is essential early in life to provide both a motive and a means for achievement in the future. The sense of time, as it is expressed by the child, seems to commence between the ages of two and two and a half, for it is at that age when words designating the future begin to appear in the child's talk. At that time, words dealing with the future are tied to activities and concrete events. By the end of the third year, the child begins to comprehend "future roles". According to Singer, it is at this time that differences begin to become apparent in the parents' behavior toward the child that seem to condition the development of different time perspectives, aspirations and the necessary behavior to achieve them. The process begins with the idea that the parent generates concerning the child's future. In their research on Head Start children, Radin and Sonquist found that the most important factor connected with the child's success during the program was the parents' occupational expectations for the child in the future. How young people see their future is directly connected with their academic performance and with their ability to live, cope and grow in a high change society. Future conscious education is a key to adaptability and the authors of Learning for Tomorrow argue it is especially significant for women and for the children of ethnic minorities which today can be regarded as "future deprived". (4:xxiv)

Today's Child in Tomorrow's World

One way of looking ahead at the future is to extract from today's early childhood education those things which are at least worthy of experimentation.

It is at once apparent that the problem is different for children of different income groups. The large majority of middle income parents have a future-focused role-image for their children which is conveyed to the children at an early age. Sometimes it is conveyed too strongly at too early an age. To convey a future-focused role-image is much more difficult for parents who, themselves, are unemployed or employed at such meager wages that they must worry whether the family will be fed from one month to the next. Parents who, of necessity, are so present-oriented can hardly convey a future-focused role-image to their children.

An examination of educational programs will also provide differences in their ability to help children form future-focused role-images. These differences arise from the different things which are stressed in the program. The question that has to be answered is "What are the characteristics of young children which, if encouraged, will help them be better able to cope with the world of tomorrow?" Some directions for early childhood education seem to rise clearly from the projections of the futurists.

Focus on the Development of Coping Skills

This is only a new slant on an old emphasis. The young child's interest and involvement in the process of learning provides the basis which can be used to help the child identify multiple ways to find out about things, and to solve problems. Instead of providing children with ready-made answers, it is important to provide them with varied real situations in which a variety of coping skills can be used and to facilitate their use of such skills by asking How could you find out . . . ?, How many ways can you . . . ?, What would happen if . . . ?. Try to create within the child's responses a kind of flexibility and power to adapt quickly rather than a response in terms of rules and

carefully transmitted conduct codes. Real choices beginning with such simple things as whether to work a puzzle or read a book or whether to use tempera or crayon for a painting can be made by quite young children. Older children can engage in practical problem solving situations which involve selecting from among several alternatives. Children should learn to feel comfortable in situations where answers are not all known. They should have the creative resources to find solutions when none currently exist.

Consideration of Affect in the Approach to Cognitive Skills

In the last decade, even those programs which resisted giving priority to cognitive goals found themselves giving consideration to how they provided for childrens' mental or intellectual development. Now that there is a greater emphasis on cognitive development, we need to consider how we can encourage the child to learn more and more. The emphasis here is on both a desire to learn and the development of the skill of learning. Children will have even greater needs for reading, writing, and expressing themselves than in the past. Their world has already expanded so that understanding of society in our country is no longer enough as children's lives are influenced by our interdependence with other nations of the world. It is important that we create an atmosphere in which children have many opportunities to explore, touch, taste, listen, and experiment. Further, we must help them want to communicate the results of their exploration and to find answers to the questions that arise from it. As adults we can provide the setting, facilitate children's learning, and help them enjoy the satisfactions and success that result. The responsibility extends beyond the actual facts or skills learned to the development of a joy of learning and the motivation to move on to new and more stimulating tasks.

Acquisition of a Future-focused Role-image

Cultivation of the future-focused role-image begins with the development of the self-image. School experiences should enable children to see themselves as competent and worthy people. In order to have these feelings, children must really be competent to do the things which are expected of them. The classroom, therefore, must provide for a variety of abilities and must aid children in selecting activities which are challenging but at the same time allow them to be successful. Children must also feel liked and to feel liked, their behavior must be reasonably acceptable to other children and adults.

Teachers can extend what they usually do to help children become aware of occupational options. In addition to taking the children into the neighborhood to learn the occupations people engage in, teachers can greatly extend the kinds of materials they provide to help children role-play their observations of different occupations. A further step can be taken to introduce into children's discussions other occupational roles that now exist, occupations that might come into existence, and what they will be when they grow up.

Emphasis on Humaneness

To live in the twenty-first century, in sustained peace, it will be preferable for people to see themselves as relatively more cooperative than competitive. This means that the children will need to depart from their twentieth century ancestors who placed greater stress on individually oriented competition than on group-oriented collaboration. Fortunately, young children have not yet become competitive and we can provide small group projects to help them work together to achieve their purposes.

Children also need to become aware of their interpersonal interactions with other children and adults. Perhaps of all the things that a teacher of young

children can appropriately do, it is to help children understand how other people respond to their behavior and how they respond to the behavior of other people. At a time when children are first becoming interested in doing things with other children, they will learn the human relationships skills that form the basis for the way they will interact with people. In order to do this, children must be able to relate freely to other children and they must have adult guidance for meeting a variety of situations.

Significance of Working with Parents

One could argue at this point that the role of the parent must be given careful consideration. Most parents want the best for their children but often their knowledge of education is limited to their own experience as a child in a school which was past oriented. We must help parents look at their children's education from the perspective of the child's future world and the kind of skills needed to adapt to the many changes both in personal and occupational life. It seems clear that the school alone cannot accomplish all that is needed for successful coping with tomorrow's world--that this is a job for both the school and the parents. Our recent research, which shows greater success for preschool programs when parents are involved, provides the beginning support but we need to extend this research to provide greater insight into ways that parents and schools can work together more successfully. Value conflicts must be resolved and consistent directions for programs must be developed.

Conclusion

Fortunately, those concerned with the planning of educational programs can usually see ways the programs need improvement. To the current concerns we need to add recognition of the need for planning ways to develop future-oriented skills. We need to focus more on the kinds of skills today's children will need to cope with tomorrow's world. This requires a different perspective

from that commonly held. The degree to which success will be attained will be determined by the insight the adults have into the kinds of skills that will be needed and by their abilities to guide the learning of the children. Since we are talking of the future, none of us knows for sure what will be needed, but creative adults which help children to cope with situations in creative ways will do much to provide hope for the future.

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